

## *Associated Press*

### **Justice requests filing surcharge to fund legal aid for poor**

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OLYMPIA (AP) - The Washington Supreme Court is asking the Legislature to approve a \$90 surcharge on a court filing fee to help provide legal help for the poor in civil cases, Chief Justice Gerry Alexander said Wednesday.

"Some might say, why should we support this when we face tough financial times?" Alexander asked in his State of the Judiciary address to a joint session of the Legislature. "It seems to me in America, where we rejoice in the fact that we are a nation devoted to the rule of law, we should not ration access to justice."

The recommendation comes from the court's Task Force on Civil Equal Justice Funding, created in 2001 to look for ways to cope with the sparse amount of money available for such cases. As the task force was studying the issue, \$900,000 was cut from state support for civil equal justice services.

That prompted the state's two main legal services providers - Columbia Legal Services and Northwest Justice Project - to cut their staffs, Alexander said.

The change would increase the cost of filing a lawsuit in Superior Court to \$200. The total fee would be split, with 54 percent going to counties and 46 percent going to the state for a newly created equal justice account.

Alexander also requested money for five additional Superior Court judgeships and one additional District Court judgeships, arguing that increased caseloads require more judges. Two of the Superior Court judges and the District Court judge would be in Clark County, with one Superior Court judge added in the joint district that serves Benton and Franklin counties and one each in Kittitas and Kitsap counties.